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Speaking English Is Cool, But I Can't: Non-English Major Students' Perceptions on Speaking Skill Difficulties and How to Overcome Them

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Abstract

Speaking is a complex skill to master in learning English, especially for non-English major students who have limited time to learn English. In this study, 101 freshmen majoring in Information Systems at a state university in East Java were involved. Using an open-ended questionnaire, the students were asked about their perceptions of their difficulties in speaking and how to overcome the problems. From the data, it is found that there are three major problems in speaking: 1) personal problems (e.g. feeling anxious, insecure, and afraid of making mistakes); 2) linguistic problems (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and pronunciation); 3) social problem (e.g. lack of practice due to limited exposure of English outside the class). On the other hand, in terms of students' strategies to overcome the problems are practicing a lot, having self-control, doing self-preparation, utilizing media to practice speaking, using code-switching, using gestures, and stopping themselves from speaking.

Keywords: Difficulties, speaking, English, Strategies, Students' Perceptions

Abstrak

Kemampuan berbicara merupakan kemampuan berbahasa Inggris yang kompleks, terutama untuk mahasiswa jurusan non-Bahasa Inggris yang memiliki waktu terbatas untuk belajar bahasa Inggris. Dalam penelitian ini, 101 mahasiswa Sistem Informasi tahun pertama di salah satu universitas negeri di Jawa Timur terlibat. Dengan menggunakan kuesioner open-ended, mahasiswa ditanya tentang persepsi mereka tentang kesulitan berbicara dan cara untuk mengatasi permasalahan tersebut. Dari data yang diperoleh, ditemukan bahwa masalah tersebut dapat diklasifikasikan menjadi: 1) masalah yang berhubungan dengan diri mahasiswa (seperti merasa gugup, tidak percaya diri, dan takut salah); 2) masalah bahasa (seperti kosa kata, tata bahasa, kelancaran berbicara, dan pelafalan); 3) masalah yang berkaitan dengan lingkungan atau sosial (seperti kurangnya kesempatan untuk berlatih berbicara bahasa Inggris karena keterbatasan kesempatan dan input bahasa di luar kelas). Untuk mengatasi hal tersebut, para mahasiswa berpersepsi bahwa mereka dapat mengatasinya dengan cara berlatih berbicara lebih sering, mengontrol diri sebelum mulai berbicara, melakukan persiapan sebelum berbicara, menggunakan bantuan media untuk berlatih berbicara, menggunakan alih bahasa dari Bahasa Inggris ke Bahasa Indonesia, menggunakan bantuan gerak tubuh, dan berhenti berbicara ketika merasa sulit untuk berbicara.

Kata kunci: Kesulitan, berbicara, Bahasa Inggris, strategi, persepsi siswa

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is believed as one of the hardest skills in English. Since Indonesian does not use it as a second language, mastering this skill might take some effort. The fact that the mother tongue is influencing the speaking of English inside the English classroom (Riadil, 2020) makes proof. It determines as the barrier but needs to be fixed.

When we do a conversation directly, speaking plays an essential role to deliver information and has distinct qualities compared to written communication (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Hence, the difficulty of speaking publicly could have some negative outcomes for the students (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016). The teachers need to know what's the reason behind their difficulties while speaking. Moreover, teachers can develop teaching techniques to overcome it and help students be more confident than before.

According to the Indonesian curriculum, English has been taught to students since junior high school. Despite this fact, numerous students still struggle to communicate effectively in this language (Pratolo et al., 2019). This condition is getting worst when Covid-19 came to Indonesia and made the education conducted virtually. The effectiveness of teaching English in that era was questioned by people, especially in speaking. It was answered by Pahargyan (2021), that senior high school students were feeling anxious during speaking practice, especially presentations, even though conducted virtually. Therefore, the pandemic could degrade the students' confidence in speaking English. Thus, this study examines the difficulties of first-year college students who studied and graduated from senior high school during the pandemic era which affect their speaking confidence.

There was research conducted by Chand (2021) about the difficulties faced by Nepalese students in speaking English fluently. The result showed personal (anxiety, lack of confidence, nervousness, hesitation, and shyness), social (fear of criticism by friends and discouraged by teachers' correction), environmental (lack of encouraging friends to speak English), and linguistic problems (vocabulary, tenses, mother tongue interference, and pronunciation) as the major problems. The other research was done by Amoah & Yeboah (2021) about Chinese EFL learners' difficulties in speaking English. They found out that the primary reasons for their difficulties are related to psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, reluctance to try, and anxiety about receiving criticism rather than linguistic factors like inadequate vocabulary, imperfect pronunciation, insufficient grammar knowledge, and poor reading or speaking skills.

Those previous research were identifying college students' difficulties in some countries when they spoke publicly about advanced topics. Meanwhile, this research is needed since identifying Indonesian college students' difficulties in speaking English non-virtually by introducing themselves as known as basic speaking practice.

METHOD

The purpose of conducting this study is to know students' perceptions of some difficulties in speaking English and how to overcome the difficulties. Using an open-ended questionnaire asking relevant questions to the purpose of this study, the researchers distributed the questionnaire in the form Google Form to 101 freshmen majoring in Information Systems at a state university in East Java.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were then analyzed and reduced. The purpose is to eliminate irrelevant answers in this study. Next, the selected data were classified into some themes showing the perceptions of students' challenges during speaking in English.

Similarly, the data on how the students overcame the problems were classified into some themes. After that, the data were qualitatively described.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this case, the questionnaire distribution data are presented in two parts. The first part presents the data on students' perceptions of some difficulties they encountered while trying to speak in English. Then, the second part presents the data on their perceptions of how to overcome difficulties while speaking English.

1. Students' Perceptions of Speaking Skill Difficulties

The majority of the students perceived that they get difficulty with speaking skills. They stated that they got difficulties in speaking because of some reasons, such as feeling anxious and being less confident due to the lack of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and practice. Besides, they perceived that they got difficulties in arranging materials to speak and did not know how to speak in English. The data is in Figure 1.
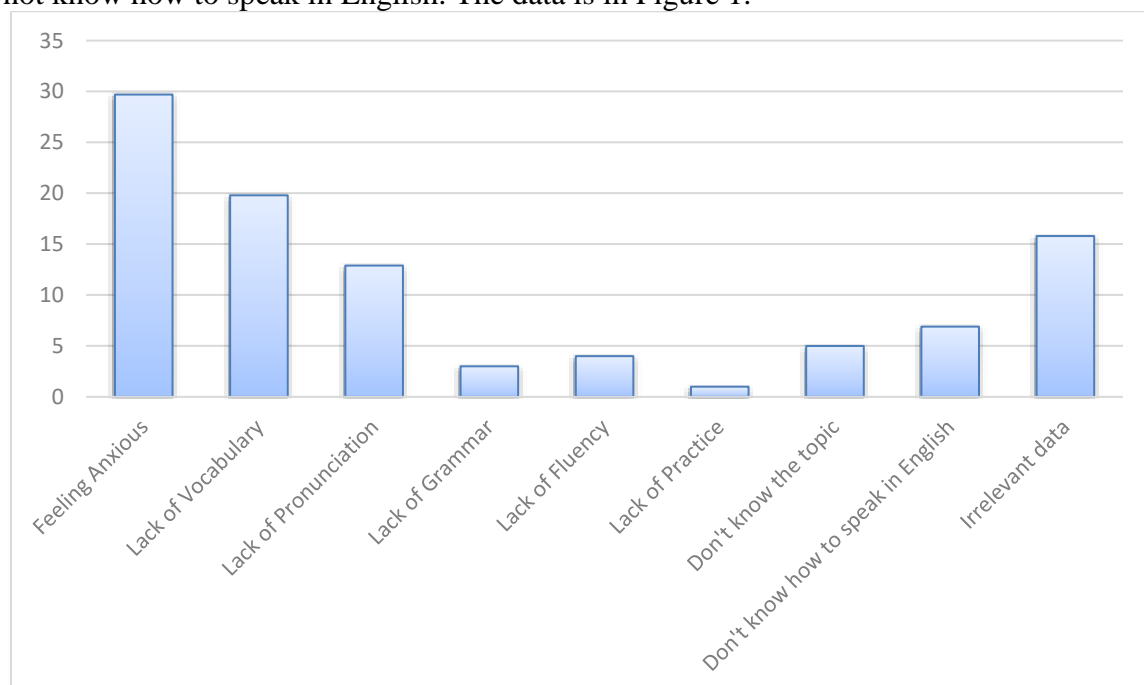

Figure 1. The Difficulties that Students Encountered while Speaking English

From the figure, it is found that 29.7% of the students perceived that they got difficulties speaking English because they felt anxious. The feeling of anxiety could be described from the statements of some students mentioning that they were nervous and feeling hesitant to speak up. Moreover, they perceived that while speaking English, they hardly remembered the information they wanted to say. As a result, they tended to be blank when they had to speak up in public, including in class even though they had already known their classmates. Besides, some of them perceived that they were ashamed of their accent while speaking English since their native language—Javanese in this case—affected the way they pronounced English words.

19.8% of students thought that lack of vocabulary became the reason why it was difficult to deal with speaking in English. While speaking, some of them thought about finding some

appropriate vocabulary to deliver their idea to another speaker. Limited knowledge of English vocabulary was then another cause why they perceived speaking English was burdensome.

Not only have a limited vocabulary, but some of the students (12.9%) also had difficulties in pronouncing English words. Some of them even mentioned that the pronunciation of some vocabulary in the past tense forms was difficult to pronounce, specifically when the verb was ended in the –ed form.

Besides, 3% of the students perceived that grammar hindered them from speaking English well. While they were speaking, they tried to figure out the right grammar for a sentence. Having limited knowledge of grammar, they gave up speaking English.

The next problem that some students had was a lack of fluency (4% of the students). Regarding the response of some students, it can be assumed that being fluent in speaking English was an indicator of successful speaking. As a result, they were afraid of speaking English and they could not speak fluently.

1% of the students perceived that he did not speak English well because he lacked practice. He perceived that the time they have in class for speaking English was limited. As a result, he was not able to practice speaking English well. He also perceived that having a lot of practice speaking could help him speak English well.

Another problem found was the lack of ability to understand some topics while speaking. 5% of the students perceived that they did not understand the topic while speaking. In this case, they thought that by understanding the topic, they would be able to communicate and interact well with other speakers.

In addition, 6.9% of the students thought that they did not know how to speak English. In this case, some students explained in the questionnaire that they did not know how to begin delivering their ideas or how to start communicating in English. As a result, they gave up speaking English.

However, it is also found that 16% of the students responded to the questionnaire irrelevantly. They only stated that they got difficulty speaking English well without telling the reasons behind their responses.

From the data, the difficulties encountered by the students can be classified into three big problems, i.e. difficulties dealing with their personal perceptions, linguistic knowledge, and environment. The results of this study are similar to some previous studies (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2013; Al Hosni, 2014; Afshar & Asakereh, 2016; Shen & Chiu, 2019). Regarding the results of their studies, the difficulties in speaking English could be classified into linguistic and non-linguistic problems. In this case, the linguistic problems involve some aspects, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016). In this study, the data have shown that the students got difficulties in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

Different from a study conducted by (Jaya et al., 2022) stating that most of the students chose fluency as the most difficult thing to deal with, this study shows that vocabulary is the most problematic component in speaking English. It is reasonable since vocabulary is the key to —not only speaking but also— learning all English language skills (Akbarian, 2018). In terms of speaking skills, there is a significant correlation between vocabulary mastery and speaking skills as stated in some studies (Putri & Refnaldi, 2020; Suryatiningsih, 2016; Yusriati & Hasibuan, 2019); therefore, it is reasonable if the students perceived that having limited vocabulary could hinder them from speaking English. Nevertheless, students have to consider other components to help them speak English well since the components are inseparable.

In terms of non-linguistic problems, Afshar and Asakereh (Afshar, H.S & Asakereh, 2016) further explained that the problems deal with personal problems, such as feeling anxious, insecure, and afraid of causing mistakes. In this case, the students mostly felt anxious, insecure with their speaking skills, and afraid of being mistakes. The findings of this study are in line with the study conducted by Shen and Chiu (Shen & Chiu, 2019) state that the problems of psychological terms consisted of three major aspects, such as feeling nervous, feeling not confident, and feeling afraid of making mistakes. While speaking, the students had to deal with those negative thoughts; as a result, those problems caused students to hesitate to speak English in public.

Not only dealing with personal problems, but social problems coming from students' surroundings also belong to non-linguistic problems. Even though there was only one student who perceived that the environment caused him to have limited time to practice, the fact that it can affect his speaking skills cannot be neglected. Living in an EFL context, students are provided with limited opportunities to practice speaking English outside the class (Dahlstrom-Hakki et al., 2020). Then, class is the only place in which they have an opportunity to get language exposure and practice speaking English.

However, not a guarantee practicing speaking English in class is promising due to the time limitation of this subject in the class. For instance, in this study, the students majoring non-English only learned English for 100 minutes a week. Besides, English was intensively taught in the second semester. This kind of situation is in line with the previous studies conducted by Wahyuningsih & Afandi (2020) and Zemlyanova et al. (2021) stating that the intensive learning of English was limitedly set to a particular time. Moreover, when the English class was set, the class mostly focused on reading and writing; as a result, the students got less opportunity to practice their speaking skills.

Then, among the three categories, personal problems dealing with psychological problems become the most problematic category hindering students from speaking English. This study is then in line with a study conducted by Shen and Chiu (Shen & Chiu, 2019) showing that 38.4% of psychological factors caused students' biggest challenge in mastering speaking skills.

2. Students' Perceptions on How to Overcome Speaking Skill Difficulties

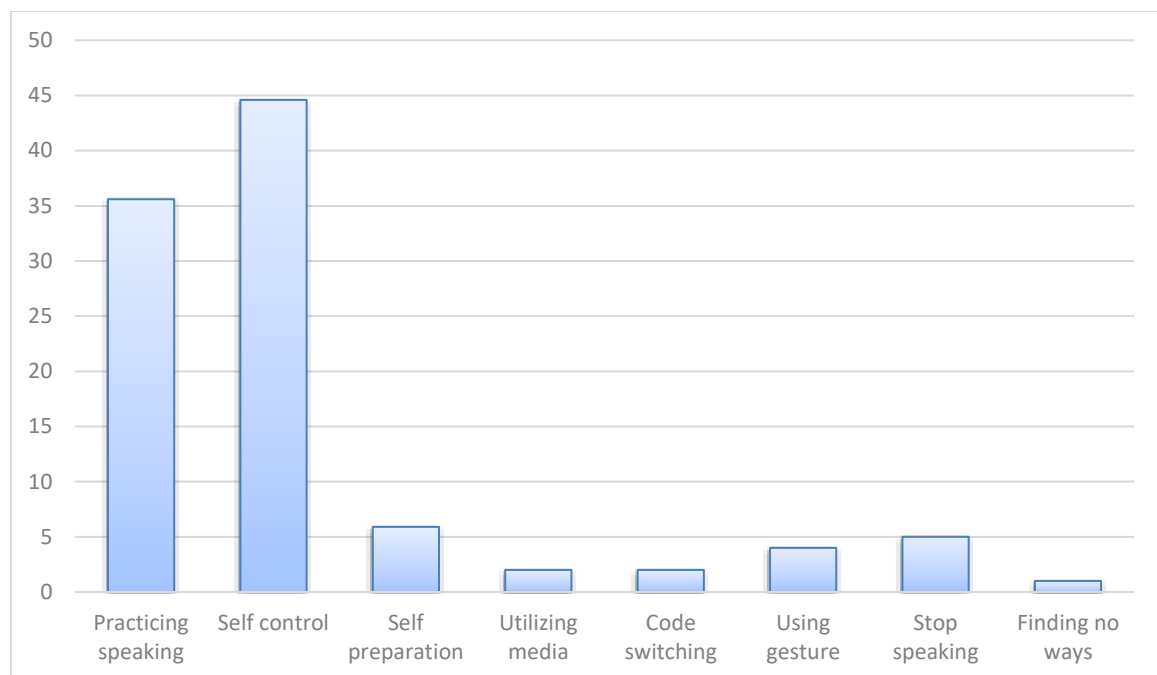They perceived that there were some ways they could apply whenever they encountered those difficulties.

Figure 2 shows the data on students' perceptions of strategies they could use to overcome difficulties in speaking. It is found that 35.6% of the students perceived that they had to practice speaking English more than before. This is in line with what had been revealed by Marlin, Saehu & Yunandayani (2021) as one of the most common strategies. They thought that they could handle the difficulties in speaking by practicing a lot since they had accustomed to speaking English. Another strategy is self-control. 44.6% of the students perceived that it was better to make themselves feel relaxed before speaking, and then they would feel confident while speaking English. Different from what Marlin, Saehu & Yunandayani's (2021) study result, relaxing as categorized as an affective strategy for students seemed not a popular one. On the other hand, Faye (2019) believed that the relaxed and stress-free environtment could help students be more ready to speak. Not only trying to control themselves, 5.9% of the students perceived that preparing the materials or topics before speaking would help them a lot. Besides, utilizing appropriate media for practicing speaking became a solution for 2% of the students. In this case, the students mentioned that the utilization of e-sport and Google Translate could help them deal with any difficulties in speaking. The similar result with the study by Nurman, Tambusai & Hasibuan (2022), where this strategy is exist but not as the main solution of student's problem.

Code-switching became another strategy that the students could use. 2% of the students perceived that switching English to Indonesia was an alternative when they did not know how to say particular words in English. It is not in line with Nurman, Tambusai & Hasibuan (2022) study that found out using code-switching as one of the most strategies among others. Another strategy used was using gestures. 4% of the students perceived that they tended to use gestures while speaking, such as smiling, avoiding eye contact, and using hands to describe something when they did not know how to respond particular conversation or what to say in English. Gestures was found helpful to reduce the limited speaking ability (Marlin, Saehu & Yunandayani, 2021 & Lingga, Simanjuntak & Sembiring, 2020). Moreover, 5% of the students

perceived that when they got difficulties speaking English, they chose to stop speaking, instead of trying to find an appropriate strategy to help them keep speaking. Last, but not least, 1 % of the students perceived that he had not found any appropriate strategies to help them speak English well.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, non-English majoring students had to deal with some difficulties while speaking English. It was found that the difficulties can be classified into linguistic and non-linguistic problems. In terms of linguistic problems, they got difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. In terms of non-linguistic problems, they got difficulties in dealing with their personal problems, such as feeling anxious, insecure, and afraid of making mistakes while speaking. Not only dealing with personal problems, one of the students assumed that the limited opportunity to practice speaking became another problem. It is reasonable since the student lives in the EFL context in which exposure and opportunity towards English are limited only in the English class which is also limitedly set.

To overcome those problems, the students also perceived that they could overcome those difficulties using some strategies, such as practicing a lot, doing self-control before speaking (e.g. taking deep breaths and thinking about a funny thing), having self-preparation (e.g. preparing the materials for speaking), utilizing another media (e.g. the utilization of e-sport and Google Translate), doing code-switching from English to Indonesian, using gesture (to help describe something or to give a signal that they got difficulty in speaking), and stopping themselves from speaking.

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